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## **GRESSION, REGRESSION, AND BEYOND: A Cognitive Reading of *The Unnamable***

**Marco Bernini**

This article provides a reading of *The Unnamable* in the light of contemporary cognitive theories of self and self-consciousness. By drawing on Daniel Dennett's account of self as a 'centre of narrative gravity' and on the three-levels model of self proposed by Antonio Damasio, the article foregrounds significant analogies with Beckett's literary journey into cognition, even before and beyond *The Unnamable*. It concludes by arguing that a cognitive approach to his narrative work can offer a framework for interpreting the extent to which Beckett has been able to explore the mind, generating through language and narrative devices experiences which sciences can only discursively report.

### **1. Introduction: A Cognitive Journey**

It is fairly odd discovering, in a letter to Georges Duthuit at the very beginning of June 1949 – only two months after having started to draft *The Unnamable*, in one of the gloomiest periods of his creative career – that Beckett was “reading *Around the World in 80 Days*,” positively classified as “lively stuff” (*LSB II*, 163). Given the descending, excavating nature of the last novel of the trilogy, it would have been less surprising to find a mention of the equally famous masterpiece by Verne, the *Voyage au centre de la Terre* (1864). Yet, in a less local scrutiny, both the horizontal, superficial (and significantly circular) orbit of Phileas Fogg's enterprise, and the vertical, geologically stratified axis of Professor Lidenbrok's quest are present in Beckett's narrative work. However, these two movements are not simultaneously operative, but rather are subsequently exploited throughout Beckett's narrative trajectory. As Mark Nixon elucidates, sometime after *Murphy* there is a turning point in how the trope of the journey is treated in Beckett's fiction, since Beckett has accepted “that there was no ‘to’ or ‘towards’, and thus no redemptive destination” (191). The horizontal pointless excursions of Belacqua across Irish cityscapes or *Murphy*'s wandering in the outer world of London progressively come to an end

in the trilogy – passing, as Shane Weller argues, from the “object-world or subject-world” of *Murphy* to the “flight from all world” in *Malone meurt* (Weller, 109). This is not to say that the trope of the journey disappears from Beckett’s literary imagination. Rather, as Nixon indicates, it “remains central to Beckett’s postwar work, but is negated” (97) or, I would suggest, inverted (*The Unnamable* being “a kind of inverted spiral,” (Beckett 2009, 310)). The horizontal plane of movement is replaced by a vertical expedition, and Belacqua’s “gression” (Beckett 2010, 33) is substituted by an inward plunge, of which *The Unnamable* constitutes the endless bottom. In this narrative manoeuvre, a different ‘towardness’ emerges, for Beckett understands, as we shall see, that the outward journey in search of the self is the “wrong figure” (qtd. in Knowlson, 247). An alternative exploration has to be directed on the way to what he calls the “seed of motion” (247) by going beyond what is called in *Molloy* “the surface leaden above the infernal depths” (Beckett 2009, 73) of the mind from which the illusion of selfhood stems.

In the present article, I want to account for this second speleological journey in Beckett’s fictional work by drawing on contemporary cognitive theories of self. On the one hand, I want to suggest that, in *The Unnamable*, Beckett does indeed reach some kind of centre of the subjective planet, the structure and functions of which resemble those qualities that the philosopher of mind Daniel Dennett attributes to what he calls the “center of narrative gravity” (1991, 418). This parallel should enrich the interpretation of the outcome of this expedition, with the discovery that the feeling of a seed of (narrative) motion is a false sensory impression responsible for the “stupid obsession with depth” (Beckett 2009, 287), which in turn accounts for the conception and perception of the self as an internal locus of subjectivity. Furthermore, I put this narrative account of the self into relation with two distinct problems related to self-consciousness: namely, the problems of circularity and of infinite regress. As we shall see, *The Unnamable* can be read as a fictional rendering of these two complications indissolubly bounded to an ontology of self-knowledge. On the other hand, I elaborate on the remarkable similarities between the three-levels model of self proposed by the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (2010), and the distinct cognitive levels that the narrator of *The Unnamable* lets the reader perceive, especially by pointing beyond its linguistic existence. In a letter to Aidan Higgins in 1952, Beckett wrote about *The Unnamable* as “the end of the jaunt,” going further by

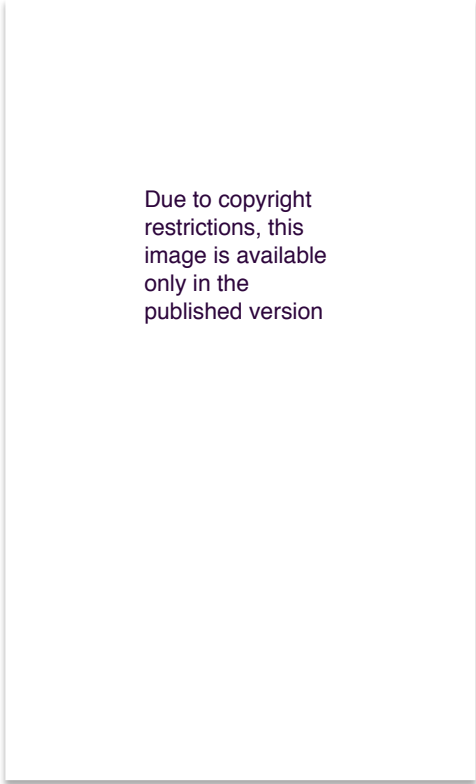
saying that “I used to think all [t]his work was an effort, necessarily feeble, to express the nothing. It seems rather to have been a journey, irreversible, in gathering thinglessness, towards it. Or also. Or ergo. And the problem remains entire or at last arising ends” (*LSB II*, 319). A cognitive reading of the novel can provide a new interpretive framework for the entwined “also” and “ergo” of what Beckett found at the (provisory) end of his tour into, to quote *Molloy*, “the laws of the mind” (9).

Methodologically speaking, the present reading might risk falling within what H. Porter Abbott criticizes as an “interpretation by circularity,” where (here replacing philosophy with cognitive science) the argumentation consists of “a happy matching of fictional content to philosophical idea, with its implicit relegation of fiction to a second-order discipline in which philosophy is the master and fiction the handmaiden” (2008, 81). In fact quite the opposite is the case. Rather than assigning to Beckett’s fiction an ancillary role as a narrative mirroring of a cognitive problem, I want to venture the idea that fiction has a specific exploratory and epistemic potential, a potential that Beckett explores. Additionally, fiction has an explanatory advantage over science, for it can avoid discursive or metaphorical descriptions by delivering, as Abbott suggests elsewhere, an “immediate experience of a variety of mysteries” through “a generation in the reader of experiences” (1973, 103). This exploration and generation of experience is what I argue Beckett attends to in *The Unnamable* by tackling the mystery of the self. Within Beckett studies, the article is intended to offer a contribution to the increasing interest in Beckett and the mind (see Barry<sup>1</sup>). More specifically, it could be regarded as complementary to studies such as the analysis by David Hesla on Beckett and consciousness – who first brought attention to the regress problem in *The Unnamable* (183) – or the work Matthew Feldman has conducted on Beckett and phenomenology, in which Feldman persuasively reads Beckett’s fiction after *Watt* as a “phenomenological rendering of intellection” (2009, 14).

## **2. ‘Things in Terms of Boxes’: Theories of Self, and the Centre of Narrative Gravity**

Despite the fact that the concept of self is still feeding “a tradition of disagreements” (Gallagher 2012) within the study of the mind, cognitive sciences have unanimously challenged this foundational

belief. The most radical trend is constituted by cognitive scientists such as Tomas Metzinger or Dennett supporting an ‘eliminativist’ position which dismisses the self as a representational illusion, since “no such things as selves exist in the world: Nobody ever *was* or *had* a self” (Metzinger, 1). Alternatively, phenomenologists such as Shaun Gallagher, or neuroscientists such as Damasio claim that we should rather distinguish between different levels of self. Even if with such significant differences, all of these approaches agree that the self does not have a place within us, that there are no traces of an homunculus or an observer in our mind – something like the little man in the head Beckett sketched in this doodle on a manuscript of *The Unnamable*.



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This sketch invites a further consideration about how biological truths are often counterintuitive to phenomenological perceptions and expectations. Without taking a stand in the abiding controversy

opposing a “Cartesian Beckett” to an anti-dualistic author,<sup>2</sup> I think this doodle is particularly telling because it suggests that Beckett was reflecting upon the widespread human tendency to portray the self as an internally located agent. Naturally, this does not mean Beckett believed in his existence. On the contrary, he struggled with the fact that although Descartes can be discredited as biologically wrong, he has never ceased to be phenomenologically persuasive (or even commonsensical). There *seems* to exist what Dennett famously labeled as a “Cartesian theatre,” in which the self as a spectator or “‘master’ discriminator” (1991, 113) witnesses the stream of images and the ever flowing words of inner speech projected onto the screen. And in this scribble, what from the outside look like wrinkles in the forehead of a distinguished gentleman, from the inside perspective of the homunculus in his head can be seen as a cascade of (written?) words he is interpreting or – appropriately for the constitutive role of narration I am about to introduce – producing. This spatial conception of the self is a way of thinking about cognition Beckett was investigating also in terms of personal imaginative attitudes, as confirmed by a letter to Duthuit sent three weeks before beginning *The Unnamable* in which he expresses the realization that it is “odd I always see things in terms of boxes” (*LSB II*, 129). Once again, this does not allow us to conclude that Beckett embraced this internal cognitive topography of the mind and the self. I think the doodle rather illustrates the kind of cognitive model – which we could describe as the ‘box model’ – that Beckett ultimately challenges in *The Unnamable* as a perceptual habit which has to be unmasked as a fallacy.

In fact, notwithstanding empirical evidence, the ‘box model’ is still prevalent as a perceptual account of self-consciousness, as when we refer in ordinary experience – and interestingly here, also in narrative analysis – to consciousness as a ‘point of view’, which is located somewhere in our head. But if we ask, as Dennett does, “where precisely in the brain that point of view is located, the simple assumptions that work so well on larger scales of space and time break down. It is now quite clear that there is no single point in the brain where all information funnels in, and this fact has some far from obvious consequences” (1992, 184). The mind acts *as* an observer, Dennett explains, only if we look from a distance at what it *does*, but if we look into the mind there is neither a single focal point of view, nor a single part of the brain functioning as an observer. Thus, the question is how do we distil a single, individual self from the multiple information

our mind processes. In other words, to paraphrase Damasio (2010), how does our self come to the mind? Dennett thinks narrative does the work, giving us the impression that there is a self where there is none. Telling stories about who we are, Dennett suggests, it is an evolutionary strategy we use to create, protect, and define our selves, just as spiders spin webs or beavers make dams:

And just as spiders don't have to think consciously and deliberately, about how to spin their webs, [...] we (unlike professional storytellers) do not consciously and deliberately figure out what narratives to tell and how to tell them. Our tales are spun, but for the most part we don't spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source.

These strings of narrative issue forth *as if* from a single source: [as if from] a center of narrative gravity.

(1991, 418, emphasis in the original)

The self is an inference we make from the stories that spin us. It is a conceptual centre we (and others) can posit for justifying the impression of unified agency that the self, as “attractor of properties” (418) and stories, elicits. Importantly, Dennett stresses that we do not have to be aware of our storytelling activity, and primarily we do not have to be conscious that we are actually building our self through it. Indeed we cannot access the fact that our self is a representation, an abstraction, much as the centre of gravity is for physics. This is what Tomas Metzinger refers to as the “autoepistemic closure” of self-knowledge, which is “a structurally anchored deficit in the capacity to gain knowledge about oneself” (57). The representational nature of the self is not accessible through introspection due to what Metzinger calls a “phenomenal transparency,” and the degree of this transparency is inversely proportional to cognitive availability (165). In other words, the more we cannot attend to the construction process of a phenomenal state the more it is transparent to us. Professional storytellers instead, to expand on Dennett's incidental remark, can consciously explore the representational nature of the self by increasing the opacity and foregrounding the wordy texture of this deception, as Beckett has masterfully done in his fictional journey to (and beyond) the centre of narrative gravity.

The idea of a transparency of the self, of an epistemic closure to

the centre of narrative gravity, is a necessary theoretical move if one is to avoid the epistemic problem of circularity, and the ontological side effect of an infinite regress of self-consciousness. The former is a sort of narratological conundrum. The story of our life, as Jerome Bruner points out, “is, of course, a privileged but troubled narrative in the sense that it is reflexive: the narrator and the central figure in the narrative are the same. This reflexivity creates dilemmas” (693). Thus, every time we want to reflectively inspect what we intend when we say ‘I’ in our story, we face what José Luis Bermúdez calls a vicious “explanatory circularity,” which is a key aspect of the “paradox of self-consciousness” because “the explanandum is part of the explanans” (16). Circularity is not the only reason to assume that our sense of self is generated through unconscious activity. If our sense of self were something we have to be conscious *of* through second reflective higher order mental states, “then these second-order mental states must also be taken as objects by occurrent third-order mental states, and so forth *ad infinitum*” (Zahavi, 24; emphasis in the original). Dennett, as we have seen, avoids the problem by saying that we do not have to be conscious of what we are doing while we are building our selves through storytelling. The centre of narrative gravity does not have a consciousness of itself; it can be allowed neither a reflective point of view nor a sense of agency, because it is solely an illusory *effect* of a storytelling activity. Nobody can access the centre of narrative gravity that everyone is.

Does this mean that we cannot speak of a self beyond words? This question could reasonably be elected as one of the most representative of Beckett’s major narratives, and the second notebook in which Beckett composed *The Unnamable* supports this ranking by having added precisely the interrogative phrase – as a sort of alternative title, as Carlton Lake tentatively inferred it to be – “Beyond Words?” (62). Cognitive sciences concede that, if not in the habitual meaning by which we refer to the self in terms of an individual subject with name, memories, and a biographical unified consciousness, there is nevertheless a primordial level of subjectivity beyond its narrative shaping, which Dennett calls a “biological self” (1991, 414), and Gallagher a “minimal self” (2000). This lower level provides just a minimal sense of ownership of the organism, and it is constituted by primordial feelings that don’t reach or require any linguistic expression. Similarly, Damasio cautions against the naïve equation of language with self-consciousness by saying that “the idea that self and



consciousness would emerge *after* language, and would be a direct construction of language, is not likely to be correct. Language does not come out of nothing” (1999, 108). For this reason, he invokes a more graduated scale of subjectivity, by dividing the path through which the brain constructs a full-shaped self into three distinct stages: a “proto-self,” a “core self,” and an “autobiographical self.” The descriptive features of this repartition – which has not to be conflated with the well-known Freudian repartition of the psyche – should immediately recall to the seasoned reader of Beckett many narrative situations within his work.

The “protoself,” Damasio says, is “the spontaneous feeling of a living body” (2010, 181). At this stage, there is neither a ‘me’ nor an ‘I,’ let alone the mastering of language. The “protoself” is the protagonist of our future story who still, as Damasio puts it, does not “*protagonize*” (202; emphasis in the original). Then, the “core self” arises thanks to the interaction between the “protoself” and the world. In this interaction, Damasio continues, the “protoself” is “raised and made to *stand out*” (202), called into life by phenomenal experience. There is not yet an ‘I’ here, but only a minimal sense of ownership of a spatial ‘here’ and a temporal ‘now.’ As a “core self,” I know the experience is happening *to me now*, even if I have no idea of who I am and what I did or what is in the past. The “core self” is a protagonist who ‘*protagonizes*’ without knowing who he is, for at this stage there is just “an unsolicited description of events, the brain indulging in asking questions that no one has posed” (204). The last stage is the “autobiographical self” when memories, biography, and a sense of personal coherence in the events appear. It is in this last phase that storytelling about our life could begin, where the centre of narrative gravity is established; after all, the narrative illusion of the self needs a material foundation.

This account of the gradual emergence of the self allows the potential description of different states of consciousness underlying the high-order activity through which the self is finally shaped as a narrative construct, is abstractedly posited as a narrative source. The lower grades of the model proposed by Damasio suggest that there is a biological unity, a perceptual centre beyond words, which only in its final stage is transformed (at the same time complicated, and simplified) into the conceptual coherence of a narrative self. Beckett himself refers to lower grades of perceptual unity ever since his essay on Proust. For example, in *Proust* he borrows from physics the same

metaphor employed by Dennett. Beckett uses it to describe the unity of perception that lies beyond any conceptual, narrative and intellectual coherence. These latter are criticized as rational forces, fighting to exclude every “discordant and frivolous intruder, whatever word or gesture, sound or perfume” which “cannot be fitted into the puzzle of a concept.” Beyond the self as a rational (and narrative) “vigilant” lies, Beckett says, the very “axis about which the sensation pivots, the centre of gravity of its coherence” (1999, 72). This precocious intuition took an entire career to be explored. Once at the “end of the jaunt,” Beckett had faced all the epistemological and ontological complication we have seen in this section, and Damasio’s model might shed light on the kind of creature lying beyond Beckett’s words.

### **3. Towards the Seed of (Narrative) Motion: *The Unnamable* and Beyond**

It is time to reap the rewards of this survey into cognitive theories of the self by showing more closely how these accounts and problems chime with Beckett’s narrative investigation. With *More Pricks than Kicks* the cognitive journey, rather than beginning with a romantic quest for the self by experiencing the world, is directed towards escape of the self through constantly moving into the world. Belacqua calls these incessant displacements “gression” (significantly, Beckett chose the deponent Latin verb *gredior* for this coinage, whose original meaning was active in the meaning, but passive or middle in the form), or “moving pause,” that “constituted a break-down in the self-sufficiency which he never wearied of arrogating to himself, a sorry collapse of my little internus homo.” As the doodle on the manuscript of *The Unnamable* attests, the idea of the self as an “internus homo” within the head has lasted almost thirty years in Beckett’s literary imagination. But if in *The Unnamable* the reader experiences from within the collapse of this architectural conception, in *More Pricks than Kicks* the collapse of the self is still executed through the silencing of its narrative activity. By incessantly moving on the horizontal surface of the world, Belacqua wants to attain or produce a “Beethoven pause” (32), accessing the “chasms of silence” (*LSB I*, 519) away from the inner storytelling activity the homunculus is voicing in the head. In a few words, what in *The Unnamable* will be a more direct inspection of the cognitive structure of self is at this early stage what we might characterize as an investigation pursued by distraction.

*Murphy* constitutes a twist, a turning point after which the outward journey is redirected to the interior strata of the mind – a path of research that will lead, in the last volume of the trilogy, to the discovery of how the very idea of depth is deceptive. If Belacqua moves into the world to silence or make sleepy the chatter of what he perceives to be the little man inside his mind, it is instead the intruding frenzy of the world that Murphy wants to silence by tying himself to his beloved rocking chair. In so doing, Murphy technically improves the way to reach what in *Dream of Fair to middling Women* were for Belacqua rare fragile moments of the “chamber-work of sublimation,” in which – still within the spatial ‘box model’ of the mind – “the cylinders of his mind abode serene” (5). However, the inward turn of Murphy into his mind marks in Beckett’s fiction neither the end of the journey nor the achievement of silence. As the oxymoronic name of Mr. Endon in *Murphy* syncretizes, the withdrawal into the realm of the mind is the ‘end’ of the outward traveling, but the activation (‘on’) of the vertical descent – after the shift of axis mentioned in the introduction. This turn follows Beckett’s understanding of what was the necessary journey to be undertaken (see also Nixon, 95-99). In a letter written in 1937, while commenting on the title of Walther Bauer’s novel *Die notwendige Reise* (*Necessary Journey*) Beckett clearly explained how, thinking about the quest for the self:

Journey anyway is the wrong figure. How can one travel to that from which one cannot move away? *Das notwendige Bleiben* [The Necessary Staying Put] is more like it. [...] The point is that the *nosci te ipsum* [know thyself] is no more mobile than the *carpe te ipsum* [gather thyself] of Murphy. The difference is that in the one motionless there is the seed of motion, and in the other not.

(qtd. in Knowlson, 247)

The figure of the horizontal journey to the self has to be substituted by “the figure of the bondage in the chair” (*LSB I*, 422), because it is in the motionlessness of the body that the inward journey can be initiated, a journey towards the seed of (narrative) motion from which it is ontologically impossible to move away (“within, motionless, I can live, and utter me,” (Beckett 2009, 319)). The investigation of the cognitive structure of self-knowledge requires a journey back to the source of the deception, narrating upstream (“Upstream, downstream, what matter” (346)) towards the centre of narrative gravity, where storytelling

begins. And this is why, from *Murphy* onwards, we rarely leave what in *Murphy* is described as a “mental chamber” (110), and in *Molloy* and *Malone Dies* becomes fictionalized writing rooms.

In *The Unnamable* every “mental chamber” disappears because, as the tempered protagonist of *First Love* says, “Such density of furniture defeats imagination” (39). For if we are to explore the functioning of the very engine of narrative imagination through which the self is established, the narration has to be brought beyond every imaginative figment, metaphorical rooms included. More complex narrative devices are required for investigating and generating in the reader the experience of the paradoxical ontology of the seed of motion. As Hoffman points out, in order to answer the long-lasting question of what a self is, Beckett “has applied a microscope to the fungi growing abundantly on the question mark” (73), but this microscope is made by the optical lens of narrative focalization. And in *The Unnamable* the reader is fictionally “recentered,” to use Ryan’s formula (22), into a very particular kind of focalizer, a first-person narrator who denies his own existence (“I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me” (285)) and identity – a lack he ironically imagines to be reproached about (“come now, make an effort, at your age, to have no identity, it’s a scandal” (370)). Thanks to the freedom of fiction from logical constraints, Beckett could locate the narration directly at the centre of narrative gravity, voicing the ontological inexistence of its “unnatural storyworld” (Alber et al.) in which the categories of space and time are negated from the very beginning (“Where now? Who now? When now”? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving.” (285)). Narratologically speaking, the features of this impossible Bachtinian chronotope apparently fit the characteristics of what Ann Banfield describes as an “empty centre”, since the reader faces “sentences with a deictic centre but without any explicit or implicit representation of an observer” (273). Nevertheless, despite the narrator of *The Unnamable* having the “very gaze of the missing observer, the very sensitivity of the instrument” whom Banfield attributes to the empty deictic centre (279), he also has a fundamental cognitive feature which Banfield’s concept does not encompass: that is, consciousness. The definition that Banfield gives of the empty deictic centre, in fact, is limited to the impersonal qualities of a narrative voice and does not take into account the strange case of a *conscious* impersonal voice (“For what I am doing is not being done without a minimum of mind” (305)). This is the ingenious formal solution Beckett employed in *The Unnamable* to investigate the

problem of self as centre of narrative gravity, making an empty deictic centre conscious of its emptiness.

First and foremost this centre is conscious of the empty deictic content of the first person pronoun it is forced to utilize, the illusion of existence being “the fault of pronouns, there is no name for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that” (397). This trouble is the problem of a circular “autoepistemic closure” of self-knowledge we have seen in the previous section, where the explanandum is part of the explanans. Every reflective act of inspection of this unnatural focalizer will then raise circular impressions, forcing it to “sometimes wonder if the two retinae are not facing each other” (295). If the self is constituted by the story of which it is simultaneously the author – the narrator and their narrated protagonist – the only epistemic certainty that the self as the centre of this circular narration can reach is that “I’m in words, made of words, others’ words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words” (379). As for the position he occupies within this world made of words, according to Dennett’s metaphor, the Unnamable says “I like to think I occupy the centre, but nothing is less certain” (289). What is left in question is who are “the others” of whose words the Unnamable claims to be made. A persuasive answer, I argue, can be found in the infinite regress problem of self-consciousness.

By placing the point of view of narration at the bottom (“Perhaps after all I am simply in the basement”; 312) of the storytelling flux (“I’ve the bloody flux”; 373), at the centre of self-spinning, and by making this centre a reflective pole towards its void, Beckett has created, as Levy effectively puts it, “a focal point of pointlessness” (11). Through this narrative device the voice firstly faces the explanatory circularity linked to the paradoxical nature of self-consciousness. However, the voice obsessively mentions that *above* its position there are endless levels from which other voices constantly torment it. The narrator apostrophizes these voices, as for example “my troop of lunatics” (302), a “college of tyrants” (304), “maniacs” (320) and “my tormentors” (341). These voices, I suggest, can be interpreted as a fictionalization of the infinite regress bound to the high-order account of self-consciousness. If the self as a centre of narrative gravity cannot affirm its existence by itself due to an explanatory circularity, there should be something from above to testify and stabilize its ontological status. Yet another level would be needed to testify for this second order, and so on. To avoid infinite regress, this ontological pile

(“we’re piled up in heaps”, 374) should end in (and begin from) a final master of identity who, as the voice says, perhaps would “turn out to be a mere high official, we’d end up by needing God” (368). In short, as the narrator further complains elsewhere, in infinite regress “there might be a hundred of us and still we’d lack the hundred and first” (333). The infinite regress is perceived bottom up, from the inexistent point of view of the centre of narrative gravity, as a descendant vociferation inflating the centre of a consciousness and an identity it refuses to admit: “it’s entirely a matter of voices, no other metaphor is appropriate. They’ve blown me up with their voices, like a balloon” (319). Thus, after having defined himself as a “big talking ball” (299), a “living torch” (354) or “drying sperm” (373), the Unnamable defines his existence as an auditory effect, speaking of himself as “a pure ear” (347), whose existence is linked to the vociferation coming from the high-order regressive levels of consciousness. This is why “when they go silent, so do I” (361). These levels are whence the enigmatic (authorial, and authoritative) figures of Basil, or Mahood speak, trying to make the centre of narrative gravity believe in its autonomous existence and centrality as a self, but their trick “was clumsily done, you could see the ventriloquist” (342).

By voicing the seed of narrative motion in this “last confession” (404), Beckett collapses the architectural ‘box model’ of cognition from within. Even the feeling of falling into a “spiraling void” (Kenner, 61) finally proves to be erroneous. If something is falling in *The Unnamable* it is the deceptive scaffolding of language through which we are given the ontological illusion of depth. We have never been anywhere if not within language itself, there are no geological strata of the mind to penetrate, and this is why *The Unnamable* is what Beckett defines as “boundary work, passage work, in which as a result the old rubbish can still be some use, while the dying is going on” (*LSB II*, 132). Narrative devices and metaphors are the “old rubbish” which have served the purpose of letting the reader experience the ontological inexistence of the centre of narrative gravity, the lack of depth of the mind and self, as well as the side effects of inquiring into the apparent transparency of self-knowledge. At the end of this delusive journey, after having explored every cognitive “gression” and “regression”, a passage (a “peephole” (350)) is finally opened to cast a glance beyond words. This peephole is created by an act of imagination of the narrative centre that after having successfully failed in bringing itself into perceptual existence can nevertheless imagine what kind of

creature and consciousness lies beyond its linguistic horizon. This “unthinkable ancestor of whom nothing can be said” (346) is called “Worm, the inexpugnable” (341), a creature whose features closely recall those of the “protoself” described by Damasio:

Worm, to say he does not know what he is, where he is, what is happening, is to underestimate him. What he does not know is that there is anything to know. His senses tell him nothing, nothing about himself, nothing about the rest, and this distinction is beyond him. Feeling nothing, knowing nothing, he exists nevertheless.

(340)

Worm, if we do not take too rigidly that “feeling nothing,” looks like the primordial self beyond and before the narrative articulation that will progressively bring him to the autobiographical stage. In order to enter this process, Damasio says, it “must be raised and made to *stand out*”, and then “it must *connect* with the events that it is involved in. Within the narrative of the moment, it must *protagonize*” (2010, 202, emphasis in the original). This is why the “tormentors” in *The Unnamable* (who consistently stand for higher levels of consciousness) want to “tear him from where he lies” by letting him have “his first experience of the vertical support” (350). Worm as the ‘protoself’ is a different kind of centre (“he is at the centre” (360)), ontologically and biologically subsisting, which “the purveyors” want to engage “through the various stages” into the cognitive “fatal concatenation,” the voice says, “which have made him what I am” (345). The centre of narrative gravity hopes that Worm could resist the temptation of language and of the phenomenal world, because “silence once broken will never again be whole” (385), and the ‘protoself’ as ontological unity will be transformed into a narrative abstraction.

This cognitive reading offers a fresh interpretation of the last lines of the novel, when the voice says it has perhaps arrived “before the door that opens on my story” (407). By voicing its ontological absence and constituting itself as a linguistic boundary, the centre of narrative gravity simultaneously blows apart the impression of vertical depth and achieves consciousness of its evolution. Beyond the threshold of language it can now imagine its ontogenesis, the stages it passed through and the creatures it has been before becoming a narrative abstraction. What lies beyond the “impalpable fissure” (Hesla, 191)

opened by this cognitive rioting is not the nothing, but the primordial stages of self that the voice can finally imagine by locating itself, as Steven Connor claims, “between being and language” (5). In other words, the journey ends facing the rich unity of the organism before the ontological looting of language.

After the completion of *The Unnamable*, Beckett wrote that “there being nobody left to utter and, independently perhaps, certainly superfluously, nothing left to utter about” (*LSB II*, 319). If we take in this statement the term ‘nobody’ as indicating a fully-fledged self, a character with memories and mastery of language, then this concern, at least for Beckett’s prose after *The Unnamable*, will turn out to be valid. But if we consider the lower, non-verbal levels of subjectivity I have suggested that Beckett was already reflecting upon in the last novel of the trilogy, *The Unnamable* is thus not the end of Beckett’s narrative investigation into cognition, and Worm is possibly not the only creature to be related to Damasio’s graduation of self. Thirty years on from *The Unnamable*, another “transitional space” (Abbott 1996, 11) will be devised, in which another creature is presented as “being on the verge of being” (11), teased this time by the temptation of memories. The “one in the dark” of *Company* could in fact be interpreted as the middle stage, the “core self”, the intermediate creature standing in-between the deflated ‘autobiographical self’ and Worm as primordial ‘protoself’ we have seen in *The Unnamable*.

In conclusion, although Beckett was not a philosopher, and certainly not a cognitive scientist, his literary investigation into cognition nonetheless achieved results that parallel scientific accounts. A cognitive approach to his narrative work – informed by narrative theory, extra-textual materials and textual analysis – can provide a framework for interpreting the extent to which Beckett was able to investigate the mind, generating through language and narrative devices experiences which the sciences can only discursively report.

### Notes

I am deeply thankful to Porter Abbott for the enduring mentoring in my research on Beckett and cognition, and to David Tucker for his valuable comments on this article.

1. The special issue of the *JOBS* edited by Elizabeth Barry can be considered as the first extensive attempt to link Beckett’s work to cognitive sciences. This article entirely endorses Barry’s introductory statements about



the potentialities of a cognitive-oriented approach to the “abnormal linguistic usage in Beckett’s prose” (1).

2. For a historical survey of the impact of Descartes on Beckett studies, and for a strong defense against this interpretive tendency see Feldman’s *Beckett’s Books* (39-57).

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